FRIENDS OF JESUS
John 15:12-17
October 14, 1979

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

None of his friends had ever seen him cry. He is an educator, a consumately rational man, successful in his field, respected by his colleagues, an effective participant in his church and other community organizations. One of the admirable things about him is that he doesn't get upset. In the midst of heated debate, when other tempers are flaring, you can count on him to be level-headed, cool, rational. In fact, none of his friends remember him becoming terribly excited about anything. But earlier this year, for the first time, he attended a reunion of old friends, the outfit with which he served in the Second World War. As is the case with many men his age, he went to war as a youngster in 1942, survived, put the whole experience on a back shelf in his mind, and proceeded with the business of living, working and having a family. His outfit had been caught in the Battle of the Bulge; a slight limp is the only reminder. He had driven a jeep out of it, loaded with wounded men through some difficult conditions. He hadn't seen any of them since. And as he told about the experience, after the reunion, he was still weeping.

Now, there are many overtones to that story. A person who shares with other people something as harrowing, intense and dangerous as the Battle of the Bulge and a spectacular ride to safety, will always feel a close emotional tie with those people. Few of us have anything quite that dramatic in our story, but we know that one of the characteristics, or requirements, of friendship is shared suffering. The dimension which interests me is fairly common. Many people look back to another time in their own history as the time of friendship; back to the War or at least to military service, back to college days and life in the Fraternity or Sorority House. "Those were the days, my friends! We thought they'd never end."

Some of that is normal. But people who think deeply and analytically about our culture are suggesting that some of it is new and peculiar to our time. I am discovering a whole new group of scholars called "Futurists", who, with one voice, are warning that a major characteristic of the new world we are building is severe strain in personal relationships, that the whole spectrum of human relationships from friendship to marriage, to parent-child, is undergoing a total upheaval. We look backward to define friendship, they are saying, because for many people there is no such thing in the present and no possibilities in the future.

Most of us read Huxley's Brave New World and Orwell's 1984 long ago, were stimulated and amazed, and relegated them to some obscure corner of our minds reserved for Science Fiction. They were, twenty-six years ago, interesting, provocative reading, but"far-out" - particularly that business about human beings reduced to automotons, the allure and mystery of romantic love reduced to biological necessity, which could be accommodated effectively in test tubes, friendship reduced to simple functional transactions devoid of feeling, and Big Brother watching it all very carefully. If you dismissed that, as I did in the bland days of the late 50's as irrelevant, perhaps you share my dismay at the realization that 1984 is now just five years away, and that Brave New World resembles the evening news far more than Star Wars.

In those books, remember, technology became the means by which the humanity of the race was gradually eroded. The idea was that the more technically proficient we become, the less human we would be. Thoughtful people are concerned that it has already happened to us. Paul Tournier, Swiss physician - theologian, has written

a superb new book on violence in which he suggests that technology has deprived us of our humanity and made us more tolerant of violence in ourselves and others. (The Violence Within, p.191).

I was astounded to discover that Sigmund Freud, who knew a little bit about human relationships, worried and wondered if any kind of "community" would be possible in the coming industrial-technocratic age.

This is a concern of ours today, not only because this is Friendship Sunday, a designation which allows dignified, private Presbyterians to act like Baptists and invite someone to church; but also because it has to do with the essence of Christian Faith. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is global, historical: it has to do with vast movements in history; it relates to structures and institutions. But it is none of that if it is not personal. It is nothing if it does not treat, somehow, human beings, and human relationships. Each age gives the church its purpose. Our purpose in the age which is emerging may be to celebrate and defend the humanity of the race, and to be the place where human relationships are valued.

The very worst thing his enemies could think to call Jesus, becomes in retrospect one of His grandest titles. "Behold - a friend of sinners." And in our lesson this morning the Fourth Gospel reports that among the last things He talked about with His disciples was friendship. This,then, is our business. But first, think a bit more about the problem.

Relationships with others - friendships, if you will - are as necessary to full life as food and drink. We know the physiological reality of that thesis. We know that babies get sick and die if they are isolated from human contact. We know that the memory of relationship and the anticipation of its renewal can keep a man alive for a long, long time in North Vietnam POW camp, or chained to a tree somewhere in the jungles of South America. Henri Nouwen, Dutch theologian, presents a case study of a middle aged man in the hospital who expressed his fear of dying during surgery to a student chaplain the night before the operation. His operation was not particularly critical, but in fact he did just that. He died. Analyzing the conversation Nouwen discovered that the student had asked the man what was waiting for him after he came home from the hospital. The man, who was already exhibiting many symptoms of depression, said, "Nothing and nobody. Just hard work." Nouwen comments, "No man can stay alive when nobody is waiting for him. Everyone who returns from a long and difficult trip is looking for someone waiting for him at the station or airport. Everyone wants to tell his story and share his moments of pain and exhilaration with someone who stayed home, waiting for him to come back." (The Wounded Healer,p.66).

What we need to understand, and what we have difficulty seeing, because we are part of the problem ourselves, is that the industrial technological culture and the way of life it has created, not only provides us with unheard of comforts, but deprives us, or at least militates against a part of our humanity which is fragile and very precious.

I do not think that it would be possible, or good, or interesting for very many of us to go to the Rockies and live in a cabin, as simply as John Denver. Besides, most of us can't afford the cost of the 4,000 gallon tank of gasoline Mr. Denver has in case he wants to keep in touch with the industrial technological society from which he has made so much money escaping. I do not think Tom Hayden

and Jane Fonda have much to offer even disguised in the garb of the upper middle class and charging $5,000 per speech. But I do think you and I need to be reminded over and over again that our humanity is at stake: that our culture does not value it very highly, in fact doesn't value it at all. I think we need to be reminded that what our culture values most is productivity and accumulation; that being gets lost in the midst of making, owning, using; that the system demands allegience no religion ever gets from us, that we will work till we drop in our shoes, that we will neglect our children, ruin our marriages and destroy our health - we will lay down our lives if need be when the company calls - because we think we must. I think it was John Ciardi who wrote something to the effect that "an ulcer, after all, is nothing more than a poem unwritten, an aria unsung, a romance unfulfilled, a landscape unpainted", and - I would add - a prayer not prayed.

I do not want to turn back the clock or calendar. But I do want to remember that technology has spawned a whole new catalog of idolatries; that middle America is convinced that busyness is next to Godliness; that effectiveness really means efficiency which means speed; that in those most human of vocations - medicine and ministry - we lust after professionalism so thoroughly that not getting involved emotionally with our patients - parishoners is a goal to be pursued and a skill to be learned, not a sin to be avoided. I do not pine for the good old days when people died of T.B. and Polio, when appendicitis was fatal and a broken hip meant the inevitable end. But I do wish to preserve the humanity of the patient whose admission to a modern hospital is accompanied by awe, fear and perplexity; who enters a world of strange machinery, esoteric vocabulary, curious smells, sounds and equipment - who will lie in bed waiting, sometimes for days, for someone to say something personal.

I am not suggesting a simple minded nostalgia but a recollection that God gives each of us both need and ability to establish and enjoy human relationships: that as children it was easy but the older we got the more difficult it became, that instead of expanding our circle of relationship and our own capacity for intimacy, many of us have been closing in, withdrawing, retreating since the far side of adolescence.

"Friend of sinners" they called Jesus. Friend, that is to say of gluttons, crooks, street people - those nobody much counted as people who mattered - those who had no friends but one another. In the Fourth Gospel - and only in this incident - He called His disciples His friends. He defined it as love which is faithful - to the end. Love which lays down life itself. They had been followers, students, disciples. But now, just hours before His arrest, He wanted them to know they wore a new and glorious mantle - they were His friends. Think of it! Not martyrs, servants of God, chosen apostles, Bishops, Kings - but friends. "No longer do I call you servants...but friends...This I command you, to love one another."

It's an intriguing thought: a moving one, for me at least. Aristotle wrote about philia, love between brothers and friends, and taught that it was only possible with peers, social and economic equals. Hierarchical political philosophers have always preferred Aristotle and that's one of the reasons. He tells us we can conform our friendships to people just like us. But in human history there is a contrary voice. Sometimes it erupts in the scornful compliment paid to Jesus - "Friend of sinners". It begins early in the story. At the beginning - Abraham, then Moses, are called, of all things, <u>Friends of God.</u> It's a staggering assertion against the sterile backdrop of Aristotle - that the relationship between God and human beings, Creator and creature, might be called friendship! But there is it throughout and

it was clearly the intent of Jesus that one of the visible, identifying characteristics of His church would be that they were friends - of His, and of one another. It was clearly His intent that something so special would start happening between them that others would be startled when they saw it, intrigued by it, compelled by it. "People are going to believe in God", He promised them, "when they see how you are getting along."

They fought, of course. They probably fought over the definition of love. The church never has been perfect. But the most damning criticism of all - the worst indictment - is unfriendliness, uncaring, impersonal. We cannot be that and be church.

Arnold Come, President of San Francisco Seminary, told a group of clergy this summer that the only churches he knew which were growing in the Bay Area were those, in his words, "Where every person is cared for by someone, and nobody gets lost."

And Juergen Moltmann, a theologian so German and so sophisticated that more people own his books than understand what's in them, writes in a recent one that the only really accurate title for any church is a "Fellowship of Friends of Jesus."

It is, I would submit, what we are about fundamentally. It is, I believe, what Jesus wanted for His disciples and what God wants for His church. It is, I am convinced, the ultimate goal - the happiest ending to all human relationships.

Jesus said it in terms His men understood - no longer Master and servants, but friends. And we need to hear His word in terms we understand, like rich-poor, management-labor, or even more intimately man-woman. Friendship is the goal, not simply our possibility, the ultimate, the purpose. Neurotically and obsessively our culture makes one of the means to the relationship the end. Sex, in spite of the pornography industry, is not the goal. It is a bridge on the way to friendship. Good marriage means friendship. Even Masters and Johnsons conclude that good and healthy sex means the same.

And parent-child. We never stop being either, regardless of our age. But at its best it does become friendship and when it does there is nothing better!

And it proceeds to the level of divine-human relationships.

"What a friend we have in Jesus," the old Gospel song goes - and while the music is not our choice and the words don't fit our theology, it says what we Presbyterians need to sing about on occasion.

"A personal relationship with Jesus Christ" our more evangelical brothers and sisters keep talking about; and while they need us to remind them of the sins of individualism, we do need them to remind us that it is personal.

We prefer it academically, so listen to Karl Barth:

> "The grace of God to sinful man is that..,
> he calls him not merely to the humility of a servant
> and the thankfulness of a child but to the intimacy
> and boldness of a friend."

It is a radical idea, that. God wills to be known among us as a friend. He has - for us - affection, respect, faithfulness and acceptance. He shares our suffering. He shares our joy. He waits for us, takes us seriously and stands with us. In Jesus Christ he lays down His life for His friends.

There is no more radical idea than that. If we think about it a bit: if we allow it to work among us, in our intimacies, in our acquaintances, who knows? Maybe "They will know we are Christians by our love."

Amen.

We are not always comfortable with intimacy, O God. We confess that when someone comes close, we back away. We confess that we have backed away from You. Help us now to draw near: to understand who You are and what You want in new ways. O God, help us to be to one another, what you, in Jesus Christ, have been to us.

Amen.